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ABSTRACT

Child care problems associated with latchkey children, teenage mothers continuing their education, and homeless families are discussed, and possible solutions are considered. The public library has been identified by many parents as a safe place for children to go after school and at other times when childcare is needed, and this has created a new and unprecedented set of problems. In the first part of this report, characteristics of these "library latchkey children" and responses of libraries in suburban and urban areas are discussed. It is argued that restrictive, discriminatory library policies are short-term solutions that benefit no one. The long-term solution is adequate, affordable, and available child care for school-age children. In the next section, the incidence of child care needs of teenage parents and the scarcity of infant care services are discussed. It is argued that one answer to the dilemma is the Schoolage Parenting and Infant Development Program (SAPID), a program funded through the California State Department of Education for teen parents continuing their high school education. Few school districts in California have SAPID programs or child support services for high school teen parents, however, and legislation expanding the SAPID program is recommended. In the final section, a discussion of homeless families and responses to their problems, it is argued that child care services supported with city and county revenue should be an integral part of the response. The Children's Roundtable Project of the California Children's Council is described and roundtable participants are listed. (RH)

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THE NEW FACE OF CHILDCARE:

LIBRARIES, TEEN PARENTS, HOMELESS FAMILIES

A REPORT FROM THE CALIFORNIA CHILDREN'S COUNCIL

THE ROUNDTABLE PROJECT

MARCH, 1988

ED 314 010

LIBRARIES AND THE CHILD CARE ISSUE

One of the most important middle class institutions, a bedrock of urban and suburban communities, is reeling under the pressure of inadequate community child care services. It is the public library. Long recognized as a quiet place to gather information, browse, or just relax, it is now identified by parents as a safe place for their children to go after school, during vacation periods, and on rainy days. In California, this phenomenon has led to the formation of library committees that meet to share mutual concerns and to seek ideas and solutions to deal with the increasing onslaught of children who crash the doors of libraries during these times because they have nowhere else to go.

In December, 1984, Los Angeles County conducted a survey involving its 92 community libraries. Library staff members recorded the number of children required by their parents to remain at the library for child care purposes. These children have become known as the Library Latchkey Children. The survey identified 913 children whose ages ranged from 3 to 14 years. Of the 913 children, 396 "...were identified as spending their afternoon hours (2:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.) at 42 sites on a full time basis four or five days a week."

In Northern California, library administrators have established policies to guide library staff members in working with the Library Latchkey crowd. They have had to establish an on-going working relationship with the Department of Social Services and other community service agencies to deal with situations that, heretofore, were unknown to them.

The Library Latchkey Children fall into at least two categories, according to one library administrator. "Those we don't worry about who use the library properly and those who are there day in and day out for 2 to 3 1/2 hours!" Their attention span cannot be sustained within the limited confines of what many libraries have to offer.

Surprisingly, the greatest crunch is often found in suburbia. There are fewer child care centers and licensed family day care homes in suburbia. The children of middle class families wait at libraries to be picked up by their parents on a routine basis. Equally as routine are calls from parents who are at work, calling to confirm the safety of their children at the library. These children range in ages from 5 to 12 years. Their numbers exceed the size of some classroom enrollments where there are teachers trained in the routinization of constructive, age-appropriate educational activities. There are older siblings taking care of younger brothers and sisters. The younger ones usually arrive early, around 2 o'clock, and wait for older siblings who arrive as much as one and a half hours later. Together they wait for parents who pick them up at 5:30 or 6 p.m.

In urban areas, the Library Latchkey Child is more on his own. The library is one of the places he or she can go to after school. The child has not necessarily been given any specific instructions as to where to go and what to do. The library is a drop-in place. Many of these children are without direction and restless. They run around the library in "packs." In the words of one librarian, "They come in and go out and they come in and go out again."

The need for child care cuts across economic lines. Middle income families' need for child care does not differ substantially from that of low income families. In some instances, the problem of availability and cost for middle income families can surpass that of low income families. Middle class communities have fewer centers and Family Day Care operators in their neighborhoods. Where it is present, the cost can be prohibitive for many young families.

On the one hand, the City of San Francisco is moving in a progressive manner to ease the child care crisis in that city. Where new construction is undertaken at least in the Downtown area, it will be mandatory that there be provisions for child care or the developers will be expected to make monetary contributions to child care services for the employees who will occupy the building.

On the other hand, San Francisco librarians have concerns for the Library Latchkey Child that exceed those of coping with overflow crowds and run-around children. They are concerned that many of the children are hungry. Many of them, those who are there on a regular basis and who are identified as being alone and without supervision, can become prey for adults who themselves are identifiable as urban loiterers -- some homeless, some mentally deranged, and some possible child molesters.

It is recognized that State subsidy for child care needs within the expanding categories is not the absolute answer. Nor can established institutions be expected to circumvent their purpose by taking on community child care needs. Restrictive, discriminatory library policies, which library administrators are loath to formulate and enforce, are short-term solutions that benefit no one. The long-term solution is adequate, affordable and available child care for schoolage children in communities of all economic diversity. Cooperation between the public and private sectors working together to identify and meet child care needs in the various communities is an economic/social issue whose time has come.

One success story comes from a suburb in Southern California. Librarians at their wits' end contacted local school officials who agreed to leave the school grounds open and restrooms unlocked until 5:30 p.m. At least on clear days, children could

use playgrounds after school. With parents willing to pay a modest fee and city government willing to hire playground supervisors through the park and recreation department, such an arrangement works even better. While it is by no means optional, it is "better than nothing," a phrase that captures the minimal hopes of many American children and families.

TEENAGE PARENTS AND THE CHILD CARE ISSUE

"Teenage mothers under sixteen incur the most long-term disadvantages. They exhibit a high drop-out rate from school, have larger families, less opportunity for employment and lower earnings when they do work. Further, they are more likely to find themselves and their children trapped in long-term poverty with its harmful consequences for health, housing, learning and social development."

- "Since the Moynihan Report," Blanche Bernstein

"The poorest people in America today are children living in the homes of teenage mothers. Their families have an average income of less than $4,000 a year."

- Edward Pitt, National Urban League, Carnegie Quarterly, Summer-Fall, 1986.

Vital statistics shows that there were 51,255 live births to mothers under the age of twenty in California in 1985. Some recorded births were to mothers under the age of twelve years. With more than 145 births per 1000 girls age fifteen to nineteen each year in California, California has the highest rate of teen pregnancy, and thereby more teen mothers than any state in the nation. The only good news is that the growth rate of births to girls under age fifteen is slow, albeit steady.

What happens to the continuing education of these young mothers? Many of them living near or below the poverty line and they have very inadequate resources (at best) or no child care support system which would allow them to return to school or enter a training program. A California State Senate survey, which inaugurated ChildNet in the Fall of 1986, found that 90% of the respondents favored special classes and child care for all California teen parents.

State Department of Education-funded Resource & Referral agencies throughout the state can attest to the fact that a preponderance of teen mothers are eager to return to school. On any given morning at a typical Resource & Referral agency the telephone rings simultaneously with the buzz of the alarm system deactivated by the first arriving staff member who opens the office. The ringing continues throughout the day -- before and after hours when the office is officially open to the public.

The first call of the day, as well as many others that follow, is typically from a teenage mother or an agency that works with teen parents. Some calls are from parents of teen mothers; some from hospital personnel or concerned social workers. The recurring theme from each caller is that the teen parent needs child care so that she can return to school and resume her high school education.

Teen parents and those who work with them need information about the availability of subsidized infant care. Unfortunately, the information most often is bleak. Child care for infants is in very limited supply and the demand is high. If there is a shortage of subsidized child care, and there is, that shortage is multiplied many times over when the need is infant care.

The scarcity of infant care is directly attributable to the high cost of operating center for infants. Licensing regulations, when caring for infants in a center setting, require cribs, running water accessible to diaper-changing areas, more staff and a physical environment different from that required for older children. Infant centers, subsidized or not, are therefore understandably limited. Licensed family day care home operators charge more to care for infants than to care for older children. In February, 1987, the average cost of infant care in California centers was $81/week. The average cost of infant care in family day care homes was $64/week.

One answer to this dilemma is the Schoolage Parenting and Infant Development Program (SAPID). SAPID is a program funded through the California State Department of Education for teen parents who are continuing their high school education. It has two components: a parenting class for teen parents (and other students who may wish to take the class) and an infant development center with mandatory parent participation where teen parents learn appropriate parenting skills under the warm and caring tutelage of infant care professionals.

Too few school districts in California have SAPID programs, or for that matter, and child support services for high school teen parents. The larger community, beset with its multiplicity of problems, has not begun to address the child care need of teen parents although more are becoming aware that the problem exists. Several months ago the news media highlighted the issue of teen parents. Unfortunately, however, the fact that many of these young mothers want to return to school has been sorely overlooked. More comprehensive media coverage could have continued with, or at least included the recognition of teen mothers' desire for continued education.

One must ask how many teen parents would return to school if there were adequate child care support?

During a recent intake for subsidized child care by an Alternative Payment Program (APP), approximately 25% of the highest priority spaces went to teen parents who were returning to school and were managing otherwise with the sympathetic support of families, friends and neighbors. In a few instances, help had been given by a licensed family day care provider who could not say "no" and thereby became the subsidizer of the infant's care. Scores of other teen parents are not as fortunate. In response to the question, "When do you want to

return to school?," they often answer, "As soon as I get child care. I can't go to school until I have someone to take care of my baby."

The solution to this growing problem may not be simple, but it does not necessarily follow that it must be complex. A beginning could be the implementation of a SAPID program on or near the campus of every comprehensive high school in California. Presently, there are about fifty-three such programs across the state. Half of the 58 counties in California do not have a single such program. Some of the most popular metropolitan cities (population 100,000-700,000) with significantly high teen parent groups have no provision to support their child care need within the structure of the school's program. Noticeably, among those districts are Anaheim, Concord, Glendale, Long Beach and Oakland. Other high density cities, San Francisco, San Diego, and Los Angeles, have one and two programs respectively. Counties such as Contra Costa, Butte, and Merced are among the counties whose teen parents contribute markedly to the state's statistics but have no child care support for teen parents.

An act of the Legislature, signed by the Governor, could expand SAPID programs in California. The immediate beneficiaries of such an act would be teen parents. Additional immediate beneficiaries would be infants who, at a very early age, would have quality supervision and developmentally appropriate child care. The ultimate beneficiary would be the State of California with an increased literacy level, more high school graduates for the job market and for higher education, and, not least, more parents with confidence in their skills to be "good" parents. It must be remembered that the babies of these teen parents will themselves be entering school within five or six years. Supporting their parents in the completion of their high school education and in acquiring parenting skills can mean a more

healthy population entering California's schools a few years hence.

It is conceivable that some high school districts may lack the space to house an infant center on or near the campus. Where this is true, funds designated for child care for teen parents can be made available through existing AP agencies. With AP programs in all counties and large metropolitan areas, this remedy is within the realm of both possibility and practicality. The solution to the problem of child care for children of high school students need not be bleak. It is solvable. The ingredients to solve the problem are community support, legislative leadership and an understanding and compassionate Governor.

State of California

● Current SAPID program

HOMELESS FAMILIES AND THE CHILD CARE ISSUE

Time Magazine called them the "Down and Out and Dispossessed." They are the homeless. From New York to California, the homeless population continues to grow by staggering proportions. No longer is the typical homeless person the stereotypic vagabond roaming the streets muttering incoherently: rather, they are families with children -- both two-parent families and single-parent families, many of whom, through no fault of their own, have fallen prey to hard times. Circumstances beyond their control have left them with nowhere to go. Loss of jobs, the skyrocketing cost of housing, condemnation of property, and fires are among the myriad reasons there are more families on the streets, homeless and seeking shelter, than at any time since the Depression. In many instances, the homeless are victims of an economy that is not working for them.

According to a report by the National Coalition for the Homeless,"...families with children are now the fastest growing segment of the nation's homeless population." In January, 1987, it estimated the number of homeless children under age twelve at 500,000 to 800,000 nationally. In California, a reasonable estimate was thirty to fifty thousand children living with their parents in cars, on the streets, in parks or in crowded shelters.

Throughout the state, local governments are grappling with problems of shelter for the homeless. In Alameda County, the Emergency Services Network (ESN) formed a Homeless Children Committee to address the specific needs of children in shelters. Its 1986 needs and assessment study found that 62% of shelter residents in Alameda County were families with children under twelve years of age.

ESN sent out questionnaires to staff members of the fourteen shelters in Alameda County. A review of the returned questionnaires revealed that while nine shelters accept families

with children, only two of the nine shelters have on-site child care. Overwhelmingly, the identified need was the need for child care. Other identified needs were for homeless families' access to subsidized child care and child care training for on-site child care volunteers.

In 1986, Assemblyman Tom Bates successfully sponsored AB 3738 which makes homeless families eligible for subsidized child care services, but "eligibility" does not entitle the family for those services. It merely qualifies them for a place on a program's waiting list.

Many of the homeless want to get on with their lives. Those with jobs are trying to hold on to them while others want to look for work. Even when homelessness is not the concern, child care is a grave issue for families because of cost and availability. The issue is more grave and burdensome when the family home is a temporary shelter. Homeless families with children must have easy access to the most current child care information. Funds must be made available for the child care needs of homeless families. The alternatives can be a chain of events unhealthful for a society already beset by bludgeoning social upheaval of undetermined consequences.

Jose Rodriguez (not his real name) was working as a shipping clerk when his wife walked out on him at about the same time his family was being evicted from their modest home. It was at the height of the rainy season. Jose had no transportation and he was left with three sons who ranged in age from seventeen months to five years. With the three boys, Jose made his way to Children's Hospital where, with the assistance of knowledgeable staff, he was put in touch with the local child care Resource and Referral agency in his service area. Fortunately, Jose's story has a happy ending. The R & R staff mobilized to assist him in

finding subsidized child care. His employer was sympathetic and allowed him time off to find child care and housing. This freed him to search for housing.

Not all families are as fortunate as the Rodriguez family. Subsidized child care programs routinely have long waiting lists of eligible families. Many of them will never be served because there just are not enough subsidized spaces to serve the needs of qualifying families. The cost of operating private centers, a major part of which is the initial start-up cost, makes private child care center operation prohibitive for many individuals with the capability of providing good care and supervision.

Even if there were more centers, who would pay the cost for the homeless children? It is a step forward when government and corporations recognize the growing need for child care, and when money is made available to conduct studies of need and to train additional child care workers. However, these efforts are not enough because they do not translate into more child care spaces. Where the homeless are concerned, need is immediate. So, there must be funding for child care services, easily accessible and earmarked "homeless." The already committed subsidized dollar does not have the elasticity to stretch over another growing category of need recipients. "The Down and Out and Dispossessed."

In general, as local and state governments evolve solutions to the problems of homeless families, child care services should be an integral part of the plan. While shelters are not the answer in any but the most temporary plan, child care is part of a family's long-term solution: as in the case of the Rodriguez family, it provides time for a parent to look for a home or to look for work, or both.

Every plan for the homeless must have child care funds. And these plans cannot wait for the State to find additional local assistance funds; it most probably must come from local city and county funds.

The California Children's Council
Children's Roundtable Project

The California Children's Council is a non-profit corporation dedicated to the public benefit in the arena of children's services. It incorporated in 1983, with the core of its original board of directors coming from the membership and staff of the State of California's Governor's Advisory Committee on Child Development during the years 1977 to 1985.

The Council is organized to serve the children and families of California by promoting appropriate research, consultation, and public education which recognize and build upon the competence of parents. The Council works to achieve this goal by:

- Instructing and training individuals to improve their abilities and to develop their capabilities to work with young children and their families.
- Instructing the public about early childhood development and thereby benefiting the community through increased understanding of the needs of young children.
- Publishing educational materials in the public interest.
- Conducting public discussion groups, panels, workshops and conferences on topics within the field of early childhood development.
- Providing management consultation and other technical assistance to human service organization.
- Promoting and conducting research and public education in child development, child care, and special education.

Recently, two of the Council's principal activities have been annual "Care for the Children" activities and a special project called the California Children's Roundtable. The "Care for the Children" events have included family picnics, marches, and press conferences, all organized as public education activities in the realms of family life and child care needs. The Children's Roundtable is a policy seminar conducted with resources provided by the James Irvine Foundation. Through the Roundtable, the Council was able to complete a set of issue papers on topics important to child care and public policy; a photo essay on poverty, work, and family life; and the design for a study of parental attitudes toward school readiness and the "hurried child."

Additional information on the Roundtable projects can be obtained by writing to the Council, 17516 Labrador St., Northridge, CA 91325.

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1983-1987

January, 1988